

Syria Update

Weekly Political, Economic, and Security Outlook

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Out to Sea: Mediterranean Migration, Return, and Syrians' Continuing Plight

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Syrians were among the 2,000 migrants to arrive by boat to the Italian island of Lampedusa in a 24-hour period last week. Image courtesy of Twitter.

> On 10 May, the Guardian reported that Syrian asylum-seekers were among the 2,000 migrants to arrive by boat in the preceding 24 hours in Lampedusa, an Italian island nestled between the Tunisian coast and the island nation of Malta. The following day, Lebanese authorities reportedly intercepted a boat attempting to smuggle 59 Syrians and one Lebanese national out of Lebanon, presumably to Cyprus.

Smuggling to work?

The unrelated developments give testament to the pressures facing Syrians as they struggle against outmoded asylum frameworks and try to eke out an existence in chronically unstable regional countries of asylum that have been racked by COVID-19 and domestic political turbulence. A considerable number of Syrians are reportedly returning formally or smuggling themselves into Syria from Turkey, in no small part because of local conditions and shortcomings in refugee governance. In early May, Arabic-language media reported that “hundreds” of young Syrian men have effectively given up protection status in Turkey “in recent days” as a condition of their “voluntary” return to Syria, likely to opposition-held areas along the country’s northern frontier.

While individual decision points will vary, returns such as these should not necessarily be seen as being voluntary, one of the bedrock principles of asylum policy. Rather, such returns are in part the product of limitations in international refugee frameworks that leave individuals without realistic resettlement options or

work opportunities in countries of displacement, even as return to their home countries remains ill-advised or impossible (see: [Point of No Return? Recommendations for Asylum and Refugee Issues Between Denmark and Damascus](#)). In Turkey, labour regulations, social pressure, and the COVID-induced economic downturn have combined to make life extremely tenuous for Syrians as well as Turks. Such conditions notwithstanding, many Syrians hope that barriers to work will fall after stringent lockdown conditions in Turkey are relaxed. In this respect, it is the risk of losing protection status in Turkey that has reportedly led many Syrians to seek out smugglers to sneak them across the border into Syria (and back again), in hopes that in Syria they will encounter fewer work restrictions while they are locked out of the labour market in Turkey. Similar overarching dynamics are at play in Lebanon. Refugees are cognisant that direct access for relief organisations in Lebanon is among their most secure lifelines as Syria’s economy crumbles. This remains true even if other conditions in Lebanon — now beset by crippling political gridlock and devastating economic fragility — are not conducive to stable, dignified life for refugees or the host community.

Not a burden, but an asset

Although seaborne migration to the EU has declined markedly since crossings reached their zenith in 2015, migration remains relevant for the EU and for the aid response to the Syria crisis. The most dire predictions made by migration opponents in Europe and elsewhere in the early stages of the Mediterranean refugee crisis have, by and large, not come true. In due

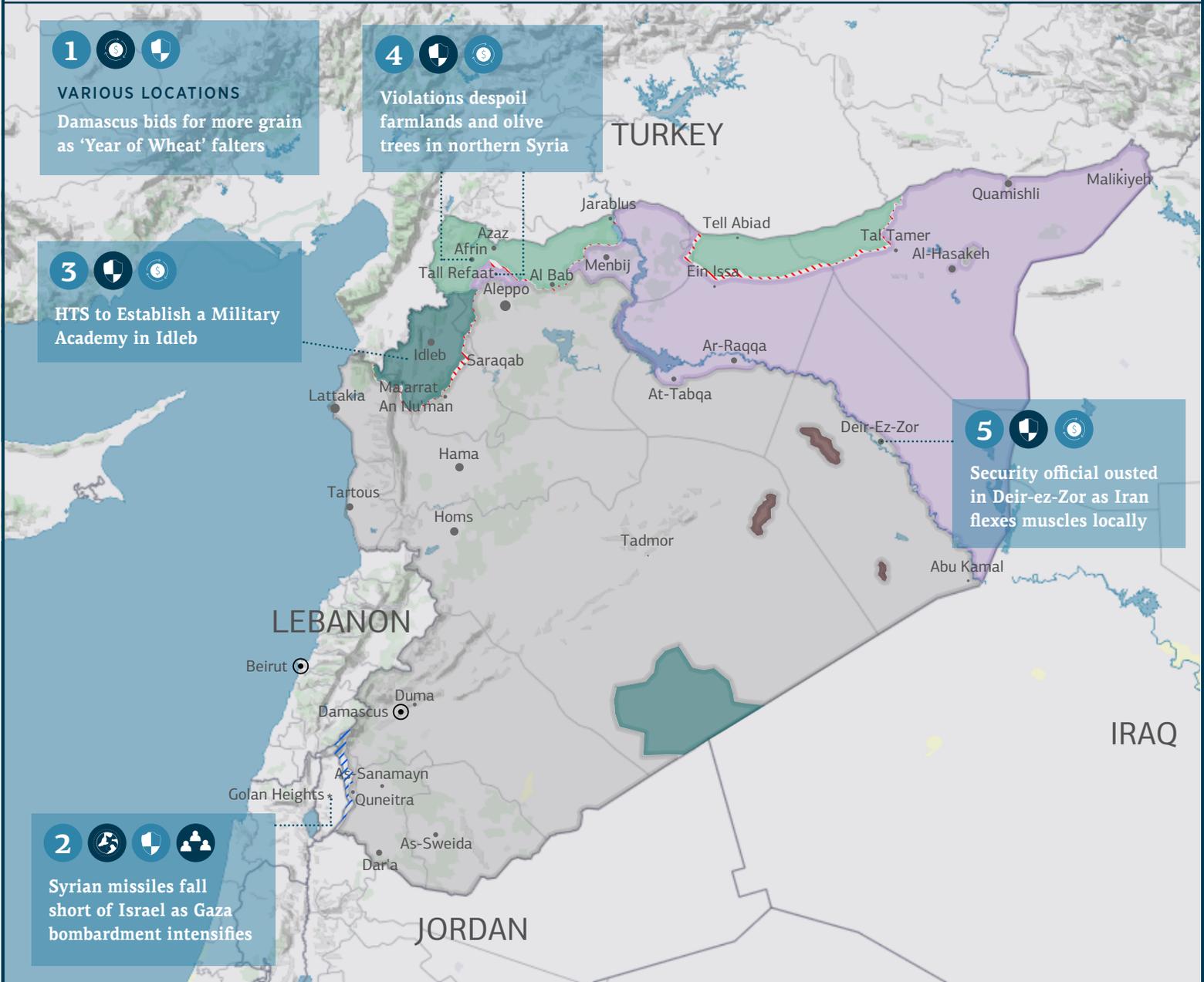
course, refugees’ economic impact on countries of asylum has largely been positive. Syrian refugees have established some 14,000 businesses in Turkey alone. Nonetheless Syrians frequently note that the laws determining their fate in host countries are arbitrary and have been crafted with the aim of deterring them from building lives for the long-term. As the Syria crisis drags on into its second decade, such considerations should offer a glaring critique of the shortfalls of current asylum policy. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 emergency continues to worsen already poor socio-economic conditions in refugee-hosting nations across the Mediterranean basin.

As conditions evolve, patterns of movement across international and internal borders are likely to become more fluid, informal, and potentially dangerous. Nonetheless, inside Syria itself, concern over protection and security is the paramount driver of continuing displacement. In order for the actions of donor states to remain relevant in the long term, the basic frameworks that govern asylum must be revisited to better accommodate the needs brought on by protracted crises like the conflict in Syria. In the meantime, it is crucial to bear in mind that safe, dignified, and voluntary refugee return to Syria remains unlikely for the foreseeable future. Continuing, long-term support will be imperative, and it will be vital for donors to adapt novel approaches for refugee support in major host nations that are experiencing extreme economic and social instability. 

Syria Update

“...the Autonomous Administration will soon announce a higher price for wheat in order to discourage local farmers from selling to the Syrian Government, likely inaugurating a seasonal bidding war that it has waged, with success, in previous crop years...”

See: Point No. 1 Below



Community Size

Greater than 1,000,000 Less than 1,000

Humanitarian Issues	Social	Security	Regional Intervention	Economy	Governance

- Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
- Islamic State (IS)
- Turkish-backed opposition groups
- Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs)
- Government of Syria (GoS)



Damascus bids for more grain as ‘Year of Wheat’ falters

VARIOUS LOCATIONS

On 9 May, Minister of Agriculture Mohammad Qatana, **announced** that low rainfall levels are expected to reduce the quantity of wheat harvested in Government-held areas. The revised procurement target is now reportedly set at a mere 300,000 tonnes, down from an earlier target of 1.2 million tonnes. In another blow to wheat procurement, on 12 May, Yousef al-Qassem, manager of the Syrian Government-affiliated General Establishment for Cereal Processing and Trade (Hoboob), announced that the institution will have an initial budget of 450 billion SYP (approx. \$141 million) to purchase wheat from farmers. At **900 SYP per kilogram** (approx. \$283 per tonne), the announced budget will scarcely provide for 500,000 tonnes of domestic wheat. Even without competition from the Autonomous Administration in the northeast, this budget will, at best, cover one-quarter of Government-held Syria’s annual need of an estimated 2.4 million tonnes of wheat (out of approximately **4 million tonnes** needed for the country as a whole). However, **reports** indicate that the Autonomous Administration will soon announce a higher price for wheat in order to discourage local farmers from selling to the Syrian Government, likely inaugurating a seasonal bidding war that it has

waged, with success, in previous crop years (see: **Syria Update 8 June 2020**).

Syria’s grain outlook is grim

The incidents are early indicators that the Syrian Government appears unlikely to reap a bumper crop from its highly publicised **Year of Wheat** campaign. It announced the campaign in late 2020 as a measure to shore up flagging wheat supplies that were linked to cyclical shortages of bread and mounting social tensions (see: **Syria Update 21 December 2020**). Harsh weather conditions and low rainfall levels have significantly hampered wheat and barley production across Syria (see: **Syria Update 10 May 2021**). In the northeast, Suleiman Barudo, co-chair of the Autonomous Administration’s Economic Committee, has announced that wheat production in the region is expected to amount to 500,000 tonnes, down from 850,000 tonnes last year. Domestic shortfalls such as these will require backfilling from reserves or international grain suppliers. On 3 May, al-Qassem announced that Hoboob has signed contracts to import nearly 1 million tonnes of Russian wheat, at a cost that remains undisclosed. However, the Government of Syria has routinely failed to execute foreign grain contracts, likely due to fiscal shortfalls and impediments that block it from accessing the international financial system.

Shooting war on hold, wheat war as hot as ever

That said, the Year of Wheat initiative may have been less concerned with grain production than with re-establishing dominance over farmers and farming lands in Government-held areas. In his statement on

9 May, the Minister of Agriculture **announced** that wheat collection and transportation will be conducted using military vehicles and in coordination with the Ministry of Defence. While it is unclear how exactly the military will engage in the process, farmers undoubtedly understood the message implicit in the military’s involvement in wheat collection. Especially in areas such as southern Syria and recently captured lands in northern Hama, where state institutions remain largely dysfunctional, military engagement is likely intended as a deterrent to prevent farmers from storing their crop or selling to bidders other than the state.

Through its insistence on state involvement in crop production, the Government’s Year of Wheat initiatives may place agricultural projects implemented by humanitarian and development organisations in jeopardy. Many farmers in Government-held areas are enrolled in some capacity in projects implemented by the few international organisations that continue to work through Damascus. With the Government threatening to use the gun to secure much-needed grain, future engagement by international donors within Syria’s agricultural sector will require serious consideration, careful scrutiny, and constant vigilance against reputational harm, diversion, and actions that fuel the war economy. HLP risks are also pertinent, particularly in parts of Hama and southern Idlib governorates that were captured by Government forces in late 2019 and early 2020. The Government has laid **claim** to vast swaths of arable lands owned by people displaced to areas under opposition

control, effectively dispossessing them in the hopes of putting these lands into crop production. Implementation in nearby areas will be particularly sensitive, and Syria's grain needs appear unfilled, despite the takeovers. ❄️



Syrian missiles fall short of Israel as Gaza bombardment intensifies

GOLAN HEIGHTS

Two rockets launched toward Israel from Syria crashed without incident in the Golan region, while a third landed inside Government of Syria-held areas, the **IDF announced** and Haaretz **reported** on 14 May. It is currently unclear who is responsible for the rocket launches. The incident follows the launch of three rockets from outside the Lebanese city of Tyre (Sour) toward Israel on 13 May. The rockets launched from Lebanon veered into the sea, causing no damage. Neither launch prompted significant official response, although Lebanese authorities were quick to

The Syrian state has long presented itself as a bulwark of the Palestinian resistance within a region defined by softening support for the broadly popular Palestinian cause.

arrest an individual **they said was linked** to a Palestinian faction.

No appetite for a second front, or a third

Authorities on all sides have downplayed or ignored the incidents as Israeli bombardment of Gaza and inter-communal violence intensify amid an episode that is on track to become the most intense violence between Israelis and Palestinians since the Second Intifada. Involvement in such a conflict is a nightmare scenario for much of the Lebanese populace, as that country plunges into deeper political and economic upheaval. The Government of Syria is no more willing to enter the fray. The Syrian state has long presented itself as a bulwark of the Palestinian resistance within a region defined by softening support for the broadly popular Palestinian cause. Recent **public remarks** on the violence in Gaza by Syrian Grand Mufti Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassoun affirm Syria's traditional position, though the Syrian state is unlikely to challenge Israel militarily in the current climate. Neither the Syrian nor the Israeli leadership are eager to open a new front in their active domestic conflicts. However, several factors may risk precisely the escalation that both states appear intent on avoiding. The Syrian state's pro-Palestinian credentials

have been tarnished by its own violent repression of Palestinian opposition factions in the ongoing Syria conflict. Damascus may calculate that additional rocket attacks against Israel can close its credibility gap with Palestinians in Syria. Additionally, an escalation of violence in Palestinian territory may prompt more independent actors, namely Hezbollah or other Iran-backed factions, to retaliate from positions in Syria. ❄️



HTS to Establish a Military Academy in Idleb

IDLEB GOVERNORATE

On 12 May, local media **reported** that the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-affiliated Salvation Government is planning to establish a military training school with the aim of training military officers in a variety of specialisations. In preparation, the Salvation Government is holding intensive meetings with officer defectors from the Syrian Arab Army, and the school is expected to begin courses in the next several months. In what is likely a preparatory step for the academy, HTS recently opened a department for (voluntary) military enlistment in northwest Syria, which will replace HTS's sundry enlistment offices, and is expected to have a greater level of central organisation.

Mobilising for the highest bidder

The more orderly recruitment of officers can be seen as a step

along the path toward greater formalisation of the HTS military apparatus. Measures such as this can be viewed as an important prerequisite for the external recognition that HTS has courted since its departure from Al-Qaeda, one of many steps in its pivot toward the West for recognition. Backstopping this bid for increased military regimentation are HTS's parallel efforts for **greater political recognition**. The former will remain more probable than the latter for the foreseeable future.

The timing of the move is notable. **Economic hardship** is reportedly driving members of Turkish-backed opposition factions to join HTS, in search of superior benefits and higher wages. Fighters from the Idlib Free Army have accused their commanders of siphoning off portions of their salaries under the pretext of diminished core funding for military activities. Fighters have been forced to seek out supplemental menial labour, or have resorted to crossing the border to Turkey in pursuit of work, while others have opted to mobilise with other groups that pay better wages; the most prominent of these groups is HTS. While economic conditions are not a new driver of military recruitment (see: **The Syrian Economy at War: Armed Group Mobilization as Livelihood and Protection Strategy**), inter-group competition over experienced fighters is a notable product of Syria's increasingly dire labour landscape. The parallel **upsurge in recruitment** of fighters in Sweida Governorate — as Russian proxies in Armenia — is predicated on similar economic considerations.

While HTS is in the process of increasing or organising military

recruitment, the Government of Syria is continuing to take steps to demobilise certain categories of its recruits. On 10 May, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad **issued** an administrative order to end the retention of reserve officers, warrant officers, and reserve personnel, starting from 1 June. While manpower and war-fighting needs have diminished with the temporary abatement of large-scale military conflict in Syria, payroll considerations give additional incentive for the state to cut back on force readiness. Further cutbacks can be expected so long as major military offensives are on hold. 



Violations despoil farmlands and olive trees in northern Syria

TALL REFAAT AND AFRIN,
ALEPPO GOVERNORATE

On 12 May, media sources **reported** that Turkish and opposition forces have continued to shell SDF-controlled areas in Tall Refaat subdistrict, including Maratet Um Hosh, Al-Alqamiyeh, Maraanaaz, and Kashtaar. Dozens of hectares of wheat and barley fields were reportedly burned in fires caused by the heavy artillery bombardment. In parallel, **multiple media** sources have reported that military factions involved in Operation Olive Branch have persisted in cutting down or destroying hundreds of olive trees in Afrin district. According to the sources, the Samarqand Brigade cut

down more than 3,000 olive trees in Kafr Safra to be sold for firewood, while around 100 olive trees were destroyed in Jum Afrin (Ceqeale Cume) by Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh due to a personal dispute between the owners of the land and members of the faction.

An overlooked victim, the environment is critical to eventual recovery

Throughout the Syria crisis, environmental losses such as damage caused to forests, agricultural lands, water sources, dams, irrigation infrastructure, and livestock have been a major overlooked casualty of the conflict. For example, between 2012 and 2019, Syria **lost** around 20 percent of its tree cover, while more than 85 percent of agricultural lands in the country are currently exposed to soil erosion. Deliberate and incidental attacks against natural and agricultural resources by warring parties have manifested during the conflict in three ways: First, as collateral damage of military operations, which has been further exacerbated by the lack of measures to protect such resources. The second is through the demolition or weaponisation of natural resources as a means of collective punishment for communities which are uncooperative or have a hostile relationship with controlling actors. The third is by overexploitation or mismanagement of natural resources due to a lack of capable governance structures on the local level, or by overuse of environmental resources in the war economy, such as cutting down agricultural trees to be sold as firewood or the over-exploitation of groundwater. Beyond the immediate steep environmental

toll, such actions will hamper the country's **post-conflict economic recovery**, particularly in rural areas, where livelihoods and complex value chains are predominantly linked to agricultural and natural resources. 



Security official ousted in Deir-ez-Zor as Iran flexes muscles locally

DEIR-EZ-ZOR CITY, DEIR-EZ-ZOR GOVERNORATE

On 9 May, local media **reported** that Syrian Military Police arrested Syrian Arab Army Major General Nizar Ahmed al-Khader, chairman of the Security and Military Committee in Deir-ez-Zor. Several **media** reports have indicated that the arrest was prompted by differences between al-Khader and Iranian militias in Deir-ez-Zor. Al-Khader was also accused of collaborating with the U.S.-led International Coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In parallel, also on 9 May, National Defense Forces (NDF) fighters and the Russian-backed Al-Quds Brigade **clashed** in Deir-ez-Zor city. This followed **reports** of further clashes on 6 May between different NDF factions in the city, which had cut off the city from its western countryside.

In Deir-ez-Zor, rivalries aplenty

The removal of a senior Syrian Government leader in Deir-ez-Zor is a demonstration of the strength

of Iranian influence in Deir-ez-Zor and the power of their associated local militias. Iranian hard and **soft power** in Syria are intertwined, a reality that was also in evidence with the reported conversion earlier this month of a mosque into a Shia religious site in a small town near Abu Kamal, a major hub of Iranian cross-border activity. However, Iran's power in the region is by no means unchecked. The mobilisation of competing local militias linked to Russia, in addition to responses by members of the Syrian state security and military apparatuses, gives a fuller picture of Deir-ez-Zor as a volatile and highly contested landscape. The fact that the most recent clashes in Deir-ez-Zor city stem from disputes over commercial and economic influence is further evidence that a generalised reduction in conflict in Syria does not necessarily mean that local clashes and violence will also abate. Looking further afield, the wider eastern region is volatile for a number of reasons (see: **Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring Pilot Project**). Deir-ez-Zor governorate is witnessing increasing activity by Islamic State (IS) sleeper cells in addition to the bids by Iran and Russia for local influence. Meanwhile, across the Euphrates River in SDF-held territory are numerous International Coalition military bases. This volatile mix increases the likelihood of run-ins between competing forces, which has the potential to destabilise the operating environment and force local actors to seek new bases of economic support — including by targeting sectors vital to aid activities. 

>> Open Source Annex

The Open Source Annex highlights key media reports, research, and primary documents that are not examined in the Syria Update. For a continuously updated collection of such records, searchable by geography, theme, and conflict actor — and curated to meet the needs of decision-makers — please see COAR’s comprehensive online search platform [Alexandrina](#). Note: These records are solely the responsibility of their creators. COAR does not necessarily endorse — or confirm — the viewpoints expressed by these sources.

Biden Faces Russian Test Over Aid in Syria

What Does it Say? The article claims that Russia is set to back the closure of the Bab Al-Hawa crossing in July, a crossing the Biden administration has stressed is necessary to supply aid to millions of displaced people in northwest Syria.

Reading Between The Lines: Russia and the Syrian Government do seek the eventual closure of the crossing in order to force all aid to be distributed via Government-controlled territory. While fears that such aid will be instrumentalised to increase pressure on the opposition, few actors have set forth workable “day after” plans.

Source: [The Wall Street Journal](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [11 May 2021](#)

Exploring Historical Control in Syria

What Does it Say? The interactive dashboard maps historical areas of control in Syria and charts their evolution between 2014 and the present, across 8,099 localities.

Reading Between The Lines: Total areas of control are an important marker of political and military influence in the evolving Syria conflict, but they are only part of the picture. Qualitative data will also be important in interpreting the impact that shifts in control have had on the operational environment, yet big data and records such as this will be vital to efforts to assess needs on a nationwide basis.

Source: [The Carter Center](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [May 2021](#)

Foreign Aid and Demographic Change in Northwest Syria

What Does it Say? The report documents how foreign aid has inadvertently furthered demographic change in the northwest, aggravating myriad housing, land and property (HLP) issues.

Reading Between The Lines: This report raises thorny questions for Gulf states and other donors concerning the way projects in Operation Peace Spring areas (and elsewhere) may solidify demographic changes in target communities.

Source: [Syria Justice and Accountability Center](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [6 May 2021](#)

>> Open Source Annex Continued

World Health Organization grants 40 Ambulances to the Syrian Regime

What Does it Say? The Syrian Ministry of Health received 40 ambulances from the World Health Organization (WHO), to be allocated to all governorates based on need.

Reading Between the Lines: This is the second shipment of ambulances and mobile clinics provided by WHO over the last six months.

Source: [Enab Baladi](#)

Language: [Arabic](#)

Date: [9 May 2021](#)

Syrian get-out-the-vote push raises eyebrows — and fears — among refugees in Lebanon ahead of the May election

What Does it Say? Pro-Government Syrian organisations and Lebanese political parties are allegedly coercing Syrian refugees in Lebanon to participate in the presidential election proceedings that will be conducted at the Syrian Embassy in Beirut on 20 May.

Reading Between The Lines: Various methods have been used to pressure refugees to register to vote in the election, from threats of gang violence and targeting by Syrian intelligence members, to coercion over humanitarian aid. Incidents such as these are troubling reminders of Syria's deep reach into Lebanese territory.

Source: [L'Orient Today](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [30 April 2021](#)

Shifting Stakeholder Positions & Conflict Resolution in Syria

What Does it Say? The article contends that foreign actors that are militarily involved in the Syria conflict have shifted their focus from either preserving or toppling the Assad regime toward consolidating their military presence and solidifying their proximate interests.

Reading Between the Lines: No real resolution can be reached in Syria without a dialogue between international actors that generates clear steps to preserve the various key interests while satisfying local actors. Whether the ultimate withdrawal of foreign forces will be possible is doubtful without serious restructuring of the Syrian state and its military apparatus.

Source: [Newlines Institute](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [5 May 2021](#)

ISIS Landmines Kill Seven Regime Fighters in Syria

What Does it Say? The explosion of a mine planted by IS in Jabal al-Aamour in the Homs desert has killed seven regime soldiers (including two from allied forces) and injured 18.

Reading Between the Lines: Hit-and-run attacks have intensified in the desert area between the Damascus outskirts and the Iraqi border, although no strategic ambition has yet materialised behind IS's latest insurgent efforts.

Source: [The Syrian Observer](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [11 May 2021](#)

2020-2021 Regional Winterization Programme Final Report: Syria and Iraq Situations - September 2020 - March 2021

What Does it Say? The UNHCR 2020-2021 winterisation programme for displaced people and refugees in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon assisted 3.8 million people.

Reading Between The Lines: Annual winterisation programmes are vitally important for IDPs and refugees, yet the volume of aid provided is routinely insufficient to meet needs.

Source: [UNHCR](#)

Language: [English](#)

Date: [11 May 2021](#)

Attitudes Toward Emigration in the Syrian Capital of Damascus: A Survey in Three Neighborhoods

What Does it Say? The study brings forth survey data to illuminate Damascene attitudes towards migration.

Reading Between The Lines: Opinion surveys in Syria are rare, and those conducted in Government-held areas are especially so. The results of this survey are not surprising, but they are valuable all the same: 63 percent of respondents wish to leave the country.

Source: [Operations and Policy Center](#)

Language: [English and Arabic](#)

Date: [5 May 2021](#)

The Wartime and Post-Conflict Syria project (WPCS) is funded by the European Union and implemented through a partnership between the European University Institute (Middle East Directions Programme) and the Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR). WPCS will provide operational and strategic analysis to policymakers and programmers concerning prospects, challenges, trends, and policy options with respect to a mid-conflict and post-conflict Syria. WPCS also aims to stimulate new approaches and policy responses to the Syrian conflict through a regular dialogue between researchers, policymakers and donors, and implementers, as well as to build a new network of Syrian researchers who will contribute to research informing international policy and practice related to their country.

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